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Exploding Johannesburg: Driving in a Worldly City

JAMES GRAHAM

This article argues for the importance of the «system of automobility» to critical cultural studies of Johannesburg, sub-Saharan Africa's most globalized city. Using Ivan Vladislavić's 2004 experimental novella *The Exploded* View as a primary example, it takes issue with the tendency for cultural studies of the city to focus on pedestrian mobility, or «walking in the city», as being an inherently liberatory practice. Without downplaying the «everyday evasiveness» of walking in the city, this article nonetheless points to the different ways in which pedestrian mobility is invariably circumscribed in a city built around the car. In Vladislavić's novella, for example, characters *drive through* rather than *walk in* the city, and this corresponds to an overlooked form of poetics and power relations that are fundamental to what might be described as Johannesburg's 'worldly' personality.

Introduction

Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* (2004) takes us on a series of journeys through Johannesburg, sub-Saharan Africa's most globalized city. Split into four subtly interconnected narratives, the text reproduces the fractured form of the city as the four main protagonists forge their lives on the fault-lines of post-apartheid society. With good humor Vladislavić ironizes their sanguine attempts to get on in the new South Africa. In different ways the Johannesburg they travel around and through is home to them; but it often also proves unhomely. The stories are marked by transient and often uncomfortable encounters. The impression conveyed is that

discrete spaces, experiences and memories within the city are only *virtually* reconcilable. As opposed to the totalizing functionalist vision of political bodies and urban planners, the only form of representation adequate to this evasive multiplicity is provisional and potential: the ambiguous meaning of a graphic designer's «exploded view». And so in *The Exploded View* Vladislavić crafts an intimate relationship between the semiotic fabric of the built material world – of urban planning, architecture and advertising — and the everyday lives of people who live in and create those spaces. In this paper I explore how these literary meditations on this sprawling, dissolute city intervene in current debates about what constitutes its «globality», paying particular attention to questions of spatial practice and mobility that often frame them.

Though only described as a minor or «gamma» world city by the Globalization and World Cities Study Group and Network (GaWC)[1], this economist and first-worldist classification does not reflect Johannesburg's importance as a cultural as well as socio-economic hub of sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Simone 1998, 2002, Robinson 2003). Against this reductionist trend the University of Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser), based in the city, is leading the way in qualitative research projects, arguing that embodied spatial practices and transnational migrancy create a singularly fluid and «elusive» metropolitan identity (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 347).[2] However, to date comparatively little work has been done by these or other researchers on the importance of automobility — of *driving* in the city. This presents something of a critical aporia, I argue in this paper, given the manifold importance of what John Urry (2000, 2004) has termed the «system of automobility» to the evolution of Johannesburg's global personality. In what follows I draw on debates in these fields and the writing of Ivan Vladislavić to illustrate the ways in which driving *through* rather than walking *in* the city are increasingly important yet overlooked aspects of social experience and cultural representation in Johannesburg, and potentially also other 'global cities' of the developing South.

Representing the city: global, worldly and literary

I want to suggest that Vladislavić's literary Johannesburg resembles what Loren Kruger, in articles on theatre (2001) and film (2006) produced in and about Johannesburg, describes as the «edge city». Her conceptualization steers a sensible

[1] See website, http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc.

[2] See, for examples, the special issue of *Public Culture* 16:4 (2004) edited by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall and the Wiser archive of events and publications, http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za.

course between heated debates about «Johannesburg's formal global status» and its «informal worldliness»:

> «Calling Johannesburg an *edgy city* captures in the first instance its uneasy collocation of unevenly linked and possibly incompatible urban, sub-urban, and ex-urban forms as well as the urbanity or its lack that may derive from these forms. Johannesburg may not appear on strictly defined lists of global cities, but it shares the global characteristics of transnational flows of capital and people, and the concentration of high-tech and high-touch nodes of social and economic exchange, made visible in the built environment of the high-rise office tower, as well as the concentration of cultural diversity on the street.» (2006: 142).

The «edge city» thus collapses the macro-economic concerns of the global cities model into the informal networks and practices of the street. In Vladislavić's Johannesburg the two are intimately connected. Despite the gargantuan disparities between the automobilized denizens of the affluent northern suburbs and the immigrant street-hawkers on the roadsides and in the inner-city, they are two sides of the same coin: Johannesburg's social and economic *worldliness*. But in case this formulation appears either trite or uncritical, the «edge city» also indicates the profound social anxieties that pervade the city's divided spaces and experiences. It is at this point in Kruger's argument, however, that we see recourse to a received set of ideas about the intrinsic relationship between *pedestrian* mobility and the liberation of urban space. If the «edge city» «connotes a pervasive nervousness about unpredictable transgressions of the edges between districts and classes», then the edge also

> «marks the site of new modes of «mobilizing» the previously "immobilized" spaces of apartheid, as urbanist Jennifer Robinson has it or, as Michel De Certeau writes of «pedestrian enunciations» of a «newly animated city» whose mobility "*insinuates* itself into the planned and readable city.» (2006: 144)

Vladislavić's Johannesburg resembles this *pedestrian* «edge city», but it also more concretely displays the *different* forms of mobility with which the city's diverse inhabitants negotiate their quotidian anxieties and aspirations. Before discussing these in more detail, it is important to note the extent to which Michel De Certeau's (1984) model of pedestrian spatial practice dominates in recent studies of Johannesburg (cf. Du Plessis 2004, Kruger 2001, 2006, Manase 2005, Nuttall 2004a, Simone 2004).

There are sound historical and political reasons for De Certeau's popularity in South Africa. The recent growth of interdisciplinary approaches in literary/cultural

studies and the social sciences find common ground in De Certeau's conflation of urban spatial practice and the (manifold) politics of representation. His work suggests that the unconscious everyday activity of city-dwellers, walking in the rationalized, commodified city-space, resists the forms of panoptical power exercised by the state and capital. These people partake in a radical form of *consumption*, one that does not «manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order.» (1984: xiii) It is from this understanding of consumption as a subversive «way of operating» (1984: xiv) that Sarah Nuttall (2004b) is able to talk positively of the «Y Generation» in Johannesburg «stylising the self» through consumerism, and Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004) lament that the «city's fabric has been described as a structure in need of radical transformation and only rarely as an aesthetic vision.» (353) The vocabulary of «style» and «aesthetics» indicates that in this conception pedestrian mobility is essentially *poetic* (which coming from its Greek root of *poesis* also implies *creative* or in some radical sense *productive*): at once readable (like a text) and yet inscrutable (to panoptical power, because it features all the indeterminacies *of* a text): the «modalities of pedestrian enunciation which a plane representation on a map brings out could be analysed …[yet they] are of an unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail» (1984: 99).

For De Certeau as for these critics, urban pedestrian mobility — «walking in the city» — thus constitutes an unwitting form of *representational* politics, of resistance and agency. But while it describes a material condition Meaghan Morris (1998) has referred to as 'evasive everydayness,' it still hovers in a tension «between a practice-based model of often illicit «behaviour» founded on enunciative speech-acts and a text-based model of «representation» which fuels functional social systems.» (Thrift 2004: 43) Given the peculiar relationship between linguistic and social «texts» described here, these issues are often explored through cultural and especially literary representations of the city and the spatial practices that form it. As a result of this, and given Johannesburg's turbulent political history, the analytical paradigm of «walking in the city» has arguably assumed a disproportionate burden of representation in literary and cultural discussions.

The major promise of post-apartheid urban regeneration was for the liberation of space. In turn this demanded the concomitant liberation of mobility. Those academics trying to account for the ongoing — and in cases the *increasing* — discontinuities of everyday mobility in South African cities, find succour in the idea that there nonetheless exists a form of subaltern agency among those who still find

themselves on the wrong side of the wall (see, for example, Bremner 2004b: 464-465). Sarah Nuttall (2004) exemplifies this in «City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa», when she writes that «De Certeau responded to Foucault's panopticon by arguing that people do have agency, can walk forward, unsurveyed» (748). To give a (rightly) celebrated example of this paradigm in practice, Nuttall suggests that Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) transliterates a poetic mobility specific to the immigrant milieu of Hillbrow. Revealing De Certeau's «ways of operating», the second-person narrative guides the reader through what Lefebvre (1991: 39) would call the «representational» space of the inner-city:[3]

> «Mpe offers a revised inventory of the city, comprising a path along its streets, both tracking and breaching historical constructions of city space. Built sites along the streets symbolise specific practices, demarcate racial identities in particular ways and in turn determine *how* one walks. Thus one might feel oneself to be at the «edge of the city», «enclosed within the lane», «walking alongside», or «facing west», depending on where one is – a complex combination of built structure and felt identity.» (743)

Combined with a focus on immigrant experience, this evocation of «felt identity» in Mpe's novella gives us a sense of inner-city Johannesburg as a distinctly worldly and especially African metropolitan social-space — an insight into what Abdoumaliq Simone (2004) calls «people as infrastructure».

The problem with these discussions is that this attempt to redeem the everyday life of the city's marginalized inhabitants overlooks the fundamental importance of the system of automobility to the overarching analysis; not least in the variable attention paid to the complex factors that determine mobility «choice» (be it walking, taking a mini-bus taxi or car-driving).[4] By contrast, we find that in *The Exploded View* the encounters and relationships of three of the four protagonists are almost wholly contingent on their use of cars and related technologies. Budlender, the first of the text's white, middle-class and male car-drivers trawls Midrand and the northern suburbs as a statistician compiling the 2001 census. His interest in the demographic form of the city is mirrored by Egan, a sanitation designer who gets caught up in the intrigues of municipal urban planning, and Gordon Duffy, a

[3] Written in the second person, as Carol Clarkson (2006) notes, "Mpe's representation of the walk has the effect of taking the reader on a guided tour" (6).

[4] This article focuses on only two of these inter-related mobilities: walking and car-driving. More work needs to be done on a) the role of the minibus taxi industry in this debate, and b) critical reflection on the translation of automobility studies into 'developing world' contexts, especially for a city as unevenly developed as Johannesburg.

billboard erector responsible for advertising the Kitsch suburban developments that Budlender gets lost in, and confronts his car-jackers in the book's final tableau. These characters all drive through rather than walk in the worldly city. Their everyday lives are completely dependant on cars — but what does it mean to say that they this makes them part of the system of automobility?

In societies that have developed around the car, however unevenly, one cannot escape the social and cultural consequences of it. As Mike Featherstone (2004) glosses:

> «For Urry [2004] automobility should be seen as a «self-organizing autopoetic, nonlinear system» which links together cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and other «novel objects, technologies and signs», in an expanding relatively stable system which generates unintended consequences. Social life has become locked into the modes of mobility that automobility generates and presupposes.» (2)

What, then, is the effect of this relationship in post-apartheid Johannesburg – a city irrevocably marked by its legacy of segregated and immobilized spaces?

Driving, walking — «choices» and assumptions

«Driving, always driving» (*Exploded View*: 6)[5] Budlender remarks nonchalantly — but to be a car-driver or even passenger in post-apartheid Johannesburg is to occupy a position of privilege dependant on a variety of circumstances. In a study commissioned by the City of Johannesburg, Mirjam Van Donk (2004) draws on the findings of the 2001 census — Budlender's findings — to reveal some stark figures about the distribution of mobility. In 2001, African men and women made up 86 per cent of those people traveling to work or school on foot, whereas white men and women constituted 62 per cent of those using a car for the same journeys.[6] Of this last group, 62 per cent of white men and 55 per cent of white women drive a car to work or school, yet the same applies to only 4 per cent of African women and 13 per cent of Colored women (29). The steady growth of a black middle-class in recent years does not as yet seem to be effecting this compound disparity, especially for black women. This is reflected in other recent fictions of the city. Despite her antipathy to «the older paradigms» of «race class and power» (2004a: 738), for example, Nuttall remarks on the acute differences in literary

[5] Further references to this text will be abbreviated and cited in the body of the text as (EV).
[6] These figures are all the more startling when the relative total size of these demographics is accounted for: 6.5 million Africans compared to 1.8 whites (Census 2001, 2004: 18).

representations of the northern suburbs «between those who walk — some children, many black adults — and those who do not. As these suburbs deracialise, it is still the case that many in the middle classes seldom walk, at least not in suburban streets»(746). In a contrast to the intimate yet cosmopolitan social networks of the inner-city streets that Simone (1998, 2004) discusses — the «felt identity» we have glimpses of in *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* — through its representation of automobility *The Exploded View* highlights discontinuities in everyday life that speak directly to these «older paradigms». It also suggests another form of *poesis*, however, a mobility and mode of observation that «consumes» and so *re-creates* the city in the radical sense proposed by De Certeau, but is not necessarily limited to a pedestrian perspective.

Vladislavić reveals this to the reader by filtering the social observations of his characters through playful narrative jokes. Despite his pedantic disposition, for example, Budlender is drawn from the first to that which *resists* measurement — to what we might call, following Achille Mbembe (2004), Johannesburg's «superfluity». His car journeys around Johannesburg, intended to map its changing formal demographics, best express its burgeoning informality. Queuing to get off the freeway one day he is assailed by hawkers: «Every street corner in Johannesburg was turning into a flea market. Informal sector employment» — he ponders — «(as a percentage of the total): 30 per cent. More?»(EV: 5) Immigrants are perplexing to the statistician. Having been given «a crash course on ethnography» by a friend over a pint, he embraces the era of political correctness by learning the physiological «signs» of their difference:

> «he was starting to see Nigerians everywhere. He had started to see Mozambicans too, and Somalis. It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him. Foreigners on every side. Could the aliens have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics.» (EV: 4)

Budlender's latent xenophobia is brought to the surface through these encounters and observations.[7] Here as elsewhere in the text, Vladislavić deftly satirises those coming to terms, somewhat uneasily, with former prejudices. In particular, he chooses those people who remain isolated in their daily movements by the constraints of car travel; those who are left increasingly out of touch with the multiplicity of city-life. Yet, despite their disconnection, the characters are

[7]As are, at a more academic level, the inadequacies of quantitative modes of analysing or 'reading' the city.

fascinated by this otherness. They seem to exist in a state of perpetual observation, gazing at those people living on the edge of their experience, *consuming* and so re-imagining their half-glimpsed lives.

Similar observations are more self-consciously evident in Vladislavić's «Joburg», an autobiographical sketch published in *Granta* in 2005.[8] The anecdotal fragments that make up the article show how the evolving form of the inner-city, or its «involution» as Mike Watts (2005: 183) describes it, has outmoded his own cognitive map; his monthly trips to the Carlton Centre in the CBD to meet his brother; a trip to the Public Library — in both cases he finds that the increasing reliance on cars by others forces him to take new routes and develop new ways of moving in the inner-city. Not only is he defamiliarized in what was once a very familiar locality, he also begins to feel the creeping isolation we find in the car journeys of his characters through the northern suburbs in *The Exploded View*. But where he tries to open himself to these changes, for them it has more severe consequences and reveals a different level of abjection for the city's immobile inhabitants. *The Exploded View* emphasizes how the system of automobility contributes to, *creates* even, the discontinuity of experience at these conurban edges.

The inauspicious fate of Gordon Duffy in the final narrative of *The Exploded View*, «Crocodile Lodge», provides a cautionary parable. Shuttling around the freeways his world is suspended between the radio traffic reports that guide his journeys and the cellphone conversations that coordinate them. In terms of his relationships with others, he lives in a bubble of virtual experience. But like other characters he also reveals the worldly or *informal* city through his fleeting perceptions from the car window. He is accosted in a jam at the off-ramp as Budlender is. Momentarily, he contemplates the street-vendors' wares: «A slave ship, mass produced, he supposed, by children in a sweatshop somewhere in Hong Kong or Karachi or Doornfontein» (EV: 162). In an instant he reads a story of transnational exploitation in their ironic merchandise, but actually encountering the marginalized, improvised life behind this story entails leaving his car and facing the perceived threat of crime that his everyday life has been structured to avoid. The roadside constitutes the edge of his experience and becomes the site where his deepest anxieties and fantasies are played out.

[8] 'Joburg' is part of a larger collection of writings, published in South Africa as *Portrait of Keys: Joburg and What-What* (Umuzi, 2006), and with a more playful subtitle in the UK, as *Portrait of Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (Portabello Books, 2006). Recent reviews by Pendock (2006) and Accone (2006) follow the 'pedestrian' trend of academic criticism by emphasising street-side observations and describing Vladislavić as the pre-eminent literary *flâneur* of Johannesburg.

In her book *Johannesburg: One City, Colliding Worlds*, Lindsay Bremner (2004) notes the evolving ambiguity of the roadside in this respect:

> «During apartheid roads became symbols of oppression and sites of resistance. Forced removals, the movement of troops and armoured vehicles, marches, road blocks, running street battles: the culture of the street was a highly politicised one. As apartheid ended and the road was liberated, it became, for many, synonymous with anxiety. It brought strangers in to our midst and those strangers were distrusted, feared and often armed and dangerous. A new landscape of razor wire, electric fencing, motorised gates, road closures, sentries and security patrols turned the road into a paramilitary zone … Simultaneously, it was claimed by a myriad small time traders, domestic workers and informal institutions, as a site of conviviality, livelihood and leisure, and extension of their homes. Its liberation brought new freedom of movement between rural and urban areas and new migration across national boundaries.» (108-109)

The self-contained world of the automobile prevents the transmission of the pedestrian «conviviality» Bremner talks of. Duffy's narrative is interrupted five times by radio traffic reports, and losing his cellphone creates a crisis that leads him back to the «Crocodile Lodge» development site, where he is attacked. His is a life where social experience is irrevocably mediated by automotive technology. The narrative begins:

> «*A truck has lost its load on the R24, that's opposite Eastgate. Traffic lights are out of order on Jan Smuts Avenue at Bompas, in Roodeport at Main Reef and Nywerheid, in Rivonia Road at 12th Street, in Sandown at Grayston Drive and Daisy.*
> The cadences of the traffic report were as familiar as liturgy. Usually it was reassuring, this invocation of rises and dips and the states associated with them, a map of sensations keyed into his own body, to the ball of his foot pressing on the accelerator pedal and the palm of his hand lazing on the gear lever. It would soothe him to hear that each of the named intersections had become the hub of a failed mechanism, the end point of an incomplete trajectory, and that he was implicated in none of it, he was still on course. But this afternoon, caught in the rush hour and sensing trouble up ahead, the measured words fell on him like a judgment.» (EV: 159-160)

What is described is nothing short of a phenomenology of the «car-driver hybrid» (Sheller and Urry 2000). The relationship between driver, car, technology and the transport infrastructure is both sensuous and rhythmic. Vladislavić's skill as a writer is to convey these «cadences» through the rhythms of the text. The traffic-report interruptions jar against the mellifluous prose but also provide a structure for the free-floating perceptions of an «automobilized person» (Katz 2000). This

representation of driving reveals and revels in a programmed comportment, but like literary representations of «walking in the city», it also discloses resistance. There is a certain etiquette to handling tailbacks, for example, that becomes a pleasurable, shared conspiracy when the traffic laws are contravened: «Someone buffeted by on the left. When the system fails, the rules are there to be broken. He nosed out of the traffic and followed the offender along the emergency lane to the off-ramp» (EV: 161-162). Like the walker in the city, the car-driver hybrid on the freeway has developed its own subtle language, insinuating itself into the «system», breaking the rules by «nosing out» of a traffic-jam. Such an enunciation provides fuel for those automobility theorists who argue that ««cars» are not just machines whose meanings are stamped out by «culture» but have their own qualities which increasingly approximate the anthropological spaces that de Certeau is so concerned to foster and protect» (Thrift 2004: 49).[9] The point being made in *The Exploded View*, however, is that in Johannesburg this phenomenon is socially deleterious.

In the fractured vision of *The Exploded View*, the city's edges are policed by unequal access to automobility. But Vladislavić does not directly protest this; his technique is discreetly ironic. Back in Duffy's bakkie:

> «*There has been an accident involving three vehicles on the N1 South before the Buccleuch interchange. Emergency vehicles –*
> Knew it! Must be the third time this month. How many accidents are there in Johannesburg on any given day? The radio reports capture just a fraction, those that call attention to themselves by happening in the rush hour, but there must be dozens more. How many drivers are speeding at this moment towards death or worse, towards a lifetime of walking with a stick, disabilities that will necessitate new hobbies, scars that will demand a new wardrobe? Accidents.» (EV: 160)

In this instance the radio report confirms Duffy's hostage to the system. His hybridized consciousness is locked in to the automobile matrix — «Knew it!» — but, again, he also displays resistance to it, a form of self-consciousness that is stimulated by reflecting on the insidious ubiquity of traffic accidents. Speeding car-drivers live on the edge of death or *worse*, the edge of mobility. This is a selfish way

[9] Following Beckmann (2004) there is a sense in which they become a Latourian 'delegate': the car has turned into such an anthropomorphic entity in three senses: 'first, it has been made by humans; second, it substitutes for the actions of people and is a delegate that permanently occupies the position of a human; and third, it shapes human action by prescribing back' (Latour 1992: 235) where to go, how fast to get there, which road to choose or how safe to be." (88)

of thinking about accidents – selfish but indubitably honest. It reveals a cutting irony: what of others? what of those affected *by* the accident?

In Duffy's view the ubiquity of speeding cars and accidents have made them banal. This banality is in fact a quite lethal aspect of everyday life in Johannesburg. Car-drivers are oblivious to or in *denial of* their affects on pedestrians.[10] In Lizeka Mda's article for *blank____Architecture: apartheid and after* (1998), she interviews an elderly black lady, a muti-seller eking out a living beside Faraday station who earlier in the day saw a man knocked down by a car right in front of her, but «she hardly pays any attention to the cars speeding past this open air hyperpharmacy» (D10). This ethnographic snapshot of an improvised «way of operating» on the roadside inadvertently expresses the appalling reality of road-safety in South African cities.

According to Roger Behrens' (2005) research, around 11,000 people die on South Africa's roads and roadsides every year, and roughly half of that total is pedestrians – some of the worst statistics in the developing world. His paper suggests that in urban areas pedestrians are more likely to be the victim of road-fatalities than car-drivers (174).[11] So not only does unequal access to automobility reveal class, racial and gendered dynamics of affluence and exclusion, it also manifests an asymmetry of roadside safety. The tragic irony here is that the car is the preferred choice of mobility for those that can afford it — not only for its relative luxury and as a vital status symbol, but also, due to perceptions of crime associated with walking in the city, for its perceived *safety* (178)[12]. But what can be done? Alongside the venerable minicab-taxi, walking is and for the foreseeable future looks likely to remain the principal mobility of the majority. This often leaves them stranded — immobilized — in certain areas of the city. How can the immobilized access and explore mobilities without feeding the system of automobility — without, that is, producing *more* immobility?

[10] This banality can also be read in terms of popular denial of automobility's dominance: automobility "works", Beckmann (2004) surmises, "*because its accidents are denied*. Collective denial enables individual mobility"(94). Gordon Duffy's lack of concern for others is symptomatic of this denial, but also of the individual's overriding *need* for mobility.

[11] Behrens does not give figures for *non-fatal* accidents. These would no doubt be equally alarming.

[12] The journalist Rory Carroll (2006) has recently written about what many see as a catch-22 scenario: "I was mugged again. It was midnight and I was on foot. A car stopped, two guys jumped out, pointed a gun at my nose and took my wallet, phone, keys and shoes. I was left wandering the streets barefoot and shaken. Walking had been a deliberate choice to root myself in my surroundings but I vowed henceforth to use my car even for short journeys." (14)

Duffy's morbid reflection on the intimacy of mobility and immobility opens the narrative to ethical concerns that are central to Vladislavić's literary project (cf. Helgesson 2004, Marais 2002). In *The Exploded View* the system of automobility contributes to a discontinuous city but also to a discontinuous *community*: it precipitates in frustrated liaisons, unsettling encounters and, ultimately, an act of violence. It also feeds a certain paradox. Where Jennifer Robinson (1998) calls for new ways of imagining the mobilization of immobilized spaces, the liberatory logic behind this premise arguably does not take into sufficient account the dominance of automobility in the way it connects areas of the worldly city and manages the speed and viscosity of flows between them. Drawing on Paul Virilio's (1997) philosophy of speed and inertia, Jörg Beckmann (2004) argues, somewhat bleakly, that

> «*mobility relies on immobility*; it is precisely because certain subjects and objects are immobilized that others can travel. Rather than seeing modernity as a continual process of 'setting free' and 'letting go', as traditional modernization theory suggests, one should see it as equally immobilizing.» (84)

Despite the negative overtones of this formulation, If in Johannesburg social life «has become locked into the modes of mobility that automobility generates and presupposes» (Featherstone 2004: 2), then one must at least consider the retrogressive dangers of championing these circumscribed modes. This is a radical view – but not one meant to stymie the urgent task of re-thinking mobility and space in the city. I agree with Robinson and Kruger (2001) that new mobilizations need to be imagined and existing improvisations recognized. The point is that the relation of these mobilities to the system of automobility needs to be thoroughly analyzed in order to counteract the potentially retardant logic that inheres in received assumptions about freeing mobility. Without this they may very well perpetuate the «metanarrative of urbanization, modernization and crisis» that Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) decry in contemporary «ways of seeing and reading the contemporary African city» (353).

Exploding the view

Robinson (1998) argues with some force that «while planners and government officials try to find ways to rearrange the city, or to encourage reconnection and integration, ordinary people are reusing and remaking urban space at a rapid rate» (D7). This is the same vein of thought that calls for Johannesburg's fluid and dynamic worldliness to be viewed against its economic and functional globality. Learning from the resourceful and imaginative practices of «ordinary people» is clearly desirable, but it threatens to collapse into a romanticized vision of «walking in the city» unless accompanied by more detailed research into the

interdependency of mobilities. Behrens (2005) takes a more pragmatic approach to finding a solution. He begins by historicizing the infrastructure of automobility.

In the 1970s-80s, he tells us, urban planning in South Africa drew from British and American models predicated on «introverted public facility and amenity provision developed in the 1920s and 1930s», and «ideas about functional road hierarchies and through-traffic elimination developed in the 1940s and 1960s» (166). As a consequence a series of erroneous assumptions were made. The major assumption was the

> «ultimate inevitability of majority, if not universal, private car ownership and use, and the availability of financial and environmental resources to continually match the demand growth in private car use places on road space with roadway construction and cheap fuel supply. These practices did not actively seek to reduce the use of motor cars in favour of public transport modes or to encourage nonmotorised modes for longer distance travel—they sought just to manage motor-car traffic more efficiently, safely and cost effectively.» (168)

Quite simply, the urban transport infrastructure was developed to meet the needs of the system of automobility, not mobility *per se*. At the same time the apartheid state was intent on immobilizing the black majority by controlling what spaces they could move to and in and economically delimiting their access to automobility. The assumption thus reveals a terminal contradiction in the socio-spatial engineering of apartheid. Like the South African economy in general, the transport infrastructure could not survive solely on immobile cheap labor. It needed mass *auto*mobility in order to sustain its modernization trajectory. Despite the nominal liberation of mobility in the post-apartheid era, the asymmetries of mobility and safety that mark this period express the enduring legacy of this automobile-centered planning. From the perspective of a historically conscious urban planner, then, the most progressive practical means of addressing this legacy entails 'rearranging' the city in ways that Robinson and many others are critical of:

> «The development of better [planning] practices will not therefore involve the selection of one network type over another, but involve the development of a sufficiently flexible and multi-layered multi-modal network able both to manage vehicular traffic and to prioritise walking and public transport.» (Behrens 2005: 176)

This is the point where Vladislavić's literary Johannesburg becomes instructive. Where levels of literary irony and ambiguity in *The Exploded View* give vertiginous life to the text's seemingly immutable portrait of Johannesburg, so too might a

similarly «exploded» view of transport infrastructure planning democratize mobility by reflecting *different* ways of experiencing, using and creating space in the city — especially the overlooked relationship between car-driver and pedestrian forms of imaginative spatial practice.

Driving his bakkie through the suburbs, moving yet immobile in his seat — *motile*[13] — Duffy's imagination wanders. He remembers the American magazines he used to read as a child — it is here that we learn about the graphic designer's «exploded view», a two-dimensional representation of disordered three-dimensional space. It is the book's «unifying» metaphor, but as such it is ironic, a forsaken promise. As Duffy remarks, «It was no longer even clear to the insightful observer how things were made or how they worked. The simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom» (EV: 190). Such is the predicament of the car-bound observer — or, indeed, the urban planner — trying to fathom the worldly city of Johannesburg. But the magazine reverie also gestures toward a familiar redemption. Its pages are full of «household tips and handyman's hints, objects put to new purposes or put in to new relationships with one another, improvements, adaptations, customizations.» (EV: 178) In a typically oblique allegory, these images mirror the kind of imaginative improvisations and appropriations of city-space — *poesis* — championed by Kruger, Nuttall and Robinson. But in this instance there remains a world of difference between Duffy's car-borne dreams of an Americanized consumer society and the daily reality of the street-dwellers who interrupt his reverie, demanding that he hand over his car. Vladislavić's Johannesburg is an aesthetic project but also remains a space of division.[14]

Conclusion

The economic imperatives of globalization presuppose new forms and increased levels of mobility. But they do not necessarily recognize the existence of improvised ways of using and so re-creating the built and imagined spaces of unevenly developed cities. In a compelling rebuttal to Ed Soja's (1997) critique of the romanticization of «the street» in urban theory, Kruger (2001) reminds us of the

[13] For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between mobility, motility and the car-driver hybrid, see Beckmann (2004)

[14] This point emphasises the way that Vladislavić's fiction disrupts received ways of seeing and reading the city. For example, when discussing the academic literature on Johannesburg's urban formation, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) suggest that in "their attempt to sort out the link between industrialization and urbanization, these accounts envision the city not as an aesthetic project but as a space of division." (357)

need to focus on pedestrian models of spatial practice in order to counter the «neoliberal view from the top that mistakes the «orderly city plan» for the messy reality below» (248). The problem is that when Kruger, like many others, talks about the streets, the roads and the roadsides, she neglects to reflect on the complex ways that Johannesburg's different urban mobilities remain circumscribed by the system of automobility. And as *The Exploded View* shows us, this system is more than simply a structure of domination. Although it invariably expresses — and, I would add, protests — the abject social discontinuities of the city, the car-driver hybrid or automobilized person is also an *embodied* spatial practice. It is another way of moving, observing and being in the city, of consuming and re-imagining the ever-changing social landscape. Where the challenge for urban planning in a «global city» is to reconcile these different mobilities within a compromised, functionalist brief, *The Exploded View* paves the way in the cultural re-visioning of urban spatial-practices in Johannesburg. The challenge for literary and cultural critics and social scientists alike is to use these kinds of representations to explore, question and critique the «global city» in a progressive manner — to explode the view.

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